

## Old regime politics and the new interpretation of the revolution

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**THE FRENCH REVOLUTION  
IN PERSPECTIVE**

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# OLD REGIME POLITICS AND THE NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE REVOLUTION<sup>\*</sup>

by

PETER ROBERT CAMPBELL

The bicentenary of the Revolution represents not just a time of celebration of an event that has shaped our past and present, but also an occasion for reassessment and, inevitably, for controversy. The current flood of publications and the many conferences have reflected the extreme diversity of approaches that can be taken by historians according to their method, insight and politics. In some cases scholars are putting together in new ways the results of impressive recent research. There is now a consensus that a 'new interpretation' is with us – even if there is no agreement about the merits of such an explanation. This essay is intended to be a contribution to the new currents, but it is also partly an evaluation and partly a reassertion: an evaluation of the new view, and a reassertion of the importance of a neglected area of studies. My argument is that to the extent that a new interpretation has taken shape, it has done so without paying due attention to a missing dimension of the Ancien Régime, that of the reality of politics. An examination of the theoretical underpinnings of the new approach will show that the very coherence of the developing interpretation provides a new justification for an old subject, the study of the court and politics. I will argue, first, that the new approach has been constructed in such a way that a certain view of politics is very much a part of the whole explanatory structure. Second, that this view does not correspond to politics as defined by the experience of its participants in the eighteenth century.

Politics, then, is the subject of this paper. For the eighteenth century, it is harder to define than might sometimes be thought. For a long time, the study of politics suffered from the stigma attached to what was pejoratively called *l'histoire événementielle*, mere events, and therefore was pursued more by scholars working in a traditional vein and often in defiance of the new directions. The court was no exception to this tendency and has only recently benefited from a revival in interest.<sup>1</sup> In spite of Elias' stimulating sociological interpretation of the court,

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<sup>\*</sup>I would like to thank Dr Anna Bryson and Marisa Linton for reading this paper in draft form and making helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup>See especially, N. Elias, *The Court Society* (Cambridge, 1981) and the proceedings of the conference on "Princes, patronage and the nobility. The Court at the beginning of the modern age (c. 1450-1650)", organised by the German Historical Institute of Lon-

based not on a detailed study of politics and its sources but (brilliantly nonetheless) on memoirs and definitions from the *Encyclopédie*, there is as yet no published full scale study of politics at the centre.<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons for the neglect has been that the continued acceptance of the misleading Tocquevillian orthodoxy about the transformation of the state under Louis XIV into an administrative monarchy effectively made such a study irrelevant. Politics was really about bureaucracy, administration and 'constitutional' opposition. The world of the court was thus the dross on the surface, the stuff of popular history, a tale of faction, mistresses, favours and redundant aristocrats. This is not the place to develop at length the argument that the court was the centrepiece of the political system – I have argued as much in another work<sup>3</sup> – and much of the debate turns on the evaluation of the reign of Louis XIV and the extent to which an administrative monarchy had been successfully developed. However, it is the case that for a long time, historians were simply not looking for politics as it was experienced by the men and women of the eighteenth century. They have concentrated upon politics as it became in the nineteenth century – administrative and bureaucratic, and as it was invented by the philosophers of the eighteenth century – theoretical and constitutional. It has thus been possible to overlook some aspects of Ancien Régime political life that were crucial to contemporaries but which no longer strike us as important.

But there are many more conventional reasons for undertaking research into the political life of the late Ancien Régime. The investigation of neglected but vital aspects of political *mores* will further an understanding of the crisis in the 1780s. Perhaps the courtly intrigue, the appeals to public opinion, the instability in the ministries and the uncontrolled drift into deeper crisis were all aspects of the long-term structures of politics. In relation to these structures, the career of Necker appears in rather a different light, the implication being that by shunning the politics of faction (and this is an obscure area of his career) and appealing to public opinion in what many contemporaries regarded as an excessively immodest and arrogant way, he undermined any chance he might have had of success. By setting his career in the context of an analysis of the rules of the game and an

don, edited by R. G. Asch, forthcoming. Conference report by Asch in the *German Historical Institute London, Bulletin*, May 1988, pp. 23-7.

<sup>2</sup>I am currently expanding my doctoral thesis on this subject for publication. Entitled "The conduct of politics in France in the time of the Cardinal de Fleury, 1723-1743" (London University, 1985), it focuses on patronage, the court as an institution of government, decision-making, and the generation and resolution of crisis within the political system.

<sup>3</sup>See P. R. Campbell, *The Ancien Régime in France* (Oxford, 1988), Chapter III; D. L. Wick has published a useful appraisal, 'The court nobility and the French Revolution', *Eighteenth-century Studies*, XIII (1980), pp. 263-84 that 'The political importance of high society during the ancien régime has been generally underrated by historians... Political power was not exercised solely through formal institutions such as the royal bureaucracy and the parlements. There existed a vast informal network of political influence dominated by the great noble families' (p. 266).

evaluation of the genuine possibilities open to him, and by reexamining some of his own rhetoric from that perspective, his role might look very different from its portrayal in his latest biography.<sup>4</sup> If Necker perhaps essayed a new politics, the more so did the revolutionaries. In order fully to understand their antipathy to faction and organised groups, and their paradoxical recourse to them, we must look not only to their theories of particular and general wills but also to their vision and experience of courtly and judicial politics before 1789. The lawyers who were so prominent in the revolutionary assemblies were surely perpetuating the procedural and legalistic strategies they had developed in a different and pre-revolutionary context.<sup>5</sup>

### I The place of politics in the new approach to the Revolution

The debate over the origins of the revolution has recently been reinvigorated by a combination of several new approaches. The swing away from the Marxist orthodoxy which held sway until the mid 1960s led first to renewed emphasis on the political sphere rather than the social. Research seemed to indicate that conflict between classes was difficult to prove and even more difficult to relate directly to the specific events of the Pre-Revolution and the early months of the revolution.<sup>6</sup> But it proved easier to attack one interpretation than to replace it with a convincing political interpretation which did not rest on the same theoretical presuppositions: a period of uncertainty has ensued.<sup>7</sup> However, if the absence of a tenable orthodoxy has led to confusion, that very situation seems to have encouraged new approaches and a stimulating reformulation of the problems. Much of the debate has rested on the notions of *mentalité* and 'ideology' as developed by the *Annales* historians and by the neo-Marxists. Another set of currents has been from the social sciences. Here there has been concern with developing theoretical models for the study of social and political activity. In particular, as models of revolution changed, the terms of the debate were necessarily modified.

In the last twenty years, research into the society and structures of the Ancien Régime has generated results difficult to square with either a Marxist or a simple political model of the crisis in the state. The present tendency, amongst

<sup>4</sup>For a different view, see R. D. Harris, *Necker and the Revolution of 1789* (New York, 1986). This biography almost entirely neglects courtly structures and political culture.

<sup>5</sup>For one aspect of lawyers and politics, see my paper 'Aux origines d'une forme de lutte politique: Magistrats, évêques et avocats, 1727-1749', in the forthcoming proceedings of the October 1989 conference *Jansénisme et Révolution*, ed. C. Maire.

<sup>6</sup>See W. Doyle, *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>7</sup>The most debated new interpretation is by F. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981). The fierce attack on the Marxist historiography it contains was first published in 1971. J. Censer has a critical evaluation of Furet's ideas as structuring the recent conference discussed below, in 'The coming of a new interpretation of the French Revolution?', *Journal of Social History*, 21 (1987), 294-310.

some historians at least, is to develop a much more refined version of a political explanation in which the 'political' is seen as a sphere including social tensions but which is primarily a 'space' having its own rules and constraints. For this sort of framework, the impact of a new intellectual or cultural history has been considerable.<sup>8</sup> Reading recent contributions to the debate, one would conclude that the study of French history and particularly the study of the eighteenth century is now being transformed by currents of historiography both sophisticated and, it might sometimes be thought, mystifying. Concepts such as modernisation, ideology, symbolism, deconstruction, public and private space, discourse and archaeology – all with their specific jargons – are invoked or borrowed to lend their framework of meaning either to new interpretations or to the new conclusions of empirical research, itself now beginning to be conducted on the basis of such theoretical insights.

Important as these new developments are, it is not my intention here to review the new literature. Rather the aim is, stimulated by a particularly valuable collection of essays, to focus upon political life in the last decades of the régime. The substantial volume edited by Keith Baker, *The Political Culture of the Old Régime*, the first of three volumes of proceedings from the conferences on the political culture of the French Revolution, is a major contribution to the debate.<sup>9</sup> The wide range of approaches to be found in the articles in the book will stimulate further research in several areas and generate discussion on a more general level. The empirical research summarised in many of the contributions is enormously useful in itself and several studies break new ground. Yet a collection so diverse is stimulating precisely because it is hard to see how the elements of the 'political culture' analysed did relate to the actual situation. Thus scholars will find themselves having to rethink the origins of the Revolution in the light of some of these papers. More than being a compendium of new research, the organising principles behind this book and its successor on the Revolution, together with the theoretical underpinnings of some contributions, make the books an attempt at reconceptualising the Ancien Régime and the Revolution. Within their covers we are justified in detecting several important new strands in historiography. These appear to the present writer to be five in number. First, there is the organising principle itself: the concept of political culture. This in turn is closely related, second, to discourse and, third to the application of Jürgen Habermas' notion of 'public space'.<sup>10</sup> Within this framework some scholars would identify a new 'politics of contestation', which is undoubtedly a helpful way of putting the accent upon a changed scene after the 1750s. Finally, there is a repeated emphasis, within this new historiography, on the contradictions or 'paradoxical

<sup>8</sup>For example, see L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (London, 1984).

<sup>9</sup>*The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture. Volume 1. The Political Culture of the Old Régime* (Oxford, 1987). Volume 2 is edited by Colin Lucas: *The Political Culture of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>10</sup>J. Habermas, *L'espace public: Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise* (Paris, 1978).

juxtapositions' of an implicit neo-Hegelianism. The latter should not surprise us, as Hegelianism is an extremely pervasive strand of modern social and political thought. These five areas are all closely related, if not interdependent. It is necessary to evaluate their advantages and disadvantages and to explore more fully their interconnections.

Political culture is a useful concept, broad enough to include a vast range of research and narrow enough, by virtue of the designation 'political', to focus attention. But important as it is, it is not without its difficulties. As the editorial introduction informs us, not everyone working in this field would agree with the suggestion that there was a single culture in a country as regionally and institutionally variegated as France.<sup>11</sup> Against this objection it could be argued theoretically that all those participating in public debate (and hence in the 'public space') shared enough understanding of each others' language to make communication possible. This is of course true, but it is vital to study the process of generation of that public language. When the study of 'political' disputes is undertaken, one is struck by the extent to which arguments took place in a language which did not truly reflect the main concerns of one set of participants. A case in point would be the Jansenists' use of the language of constitutionalism in the 1730s and 1750s, when their main aim was, arguably, religious salvation.<sup>12</sup> This is one of the few areas in which the origins of the language have been elucidated. To use Quentin Skinner's phrase, the problem of what the theorists were *doing* has in this case been resolved.<sup>13</sup> Thus the contrast between private motive and the political language revealed in recent studies serves to expose a problem. Because the notion of a political culture is so closely related to the notions of discourse and public space, there is a danger of overlooking the important conceptual difficulty posed by the translation of private concerns into public language. The language of political culture, especially the Ancient Régime theoretical language, should not perhaps be taken too much at face value, for if it is the new interpretation will depend too much upon misleading public utterances of 'private' individuals.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of discourse is now employed by scholars in many fields of history and is an enormously fecund notion. Drawing heavily on the works of structural anthropologists it constitutes a radical move away from the traditional history of ideas. By focusing on the language of texts (which might not be the conventional texts of theory but could equally well be the structure of a festival or the composition of a parade or painting) the basic categories, assumptions and values

<sup>11</sup>Op. cit., pp. xi-xiii.

<sup>12</sup>See D. K. Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France, 1757-1765* (New Haven, 1975) and Campbell, thesis cited.

<sup>13</sup>This problem and current approaches to the history of ideas are usefully discussed in J. G. A. Pocock, 'The state of the art', in *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge, 1985).

<sup>14</sup>I am aware that the distinction between public and private is artificial once the public space has been entered, but I retain it in order to emphasise not that the categories themselves are wrong (in so far as they could include everything, see Baker, p. xiii) but that historians are not in this field putting everything they could into them.

of a society may be unearthed, or 'excavated'. Because language does not merely describe a reality outside of it, but actually constructs reality by providing the structural framework in which we operate or even exist, language and power are intimately connected – as Foucault has stressed. Therefore, investigating the concept of monarchy, for example, equals investigating monarchy itself. Does then investigating the concept of politics in one set of texts, equal investigating politics itself? To assume as much would be to beg the question posed by this paper.

The great strength of discourse is that it has indicated areas in which we should be more sensitive to changes in the basic categories in operation in political society. Further, it has made us realise that there are competing discourses in many domains of life – private, public, sexual or political for example. This prompts a much more fluid and complex interpretation of politics and as such is also an important advance on both the more static vision of the Ancien Régime and the idea of a fairly simple development in politics. It raises questions about the tenability of conventional forms of explanation in historical studies, and is thus to be welcomed. An important theoretical difficulty, however, is that if discourse and culture are allowed to include everything, then the problem of singling out causes and effects remains unsolved – and is perhaps insoluble.

The notion of public space is quite rightly finding favour with historians of discourse, particularly with those involved with public opinion, journalism and political theory. To the Hegelian distinction between family, civil society and the state (which has long been employed by sociologists and political theorists to structure their reflections) Habermas added a fourth organisational category of modern society, the public sphere. Within this sphere and, potentially independently of the state, political and cultural life take place. According to him, 'bourgeois' representations of the world sought 'transparency', that is to portray and organise it as it really was. (We might note in passing that much recent work on the Revolution is emphasising a search for transparency). 'Public space' helps to control and limit the notion of the political, which risks becoming too all-embracing if 'discourse' alone is employed. It has its, as yet, unwritten history: elements of such a history include the improvement of communications, and especially of printing, which led to a great expansion in the accessibility of information, particularly of scientific, literary and political information within a developing urban society, comprising new cultural institutions.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the sphere of life concerned with public events greatly expanded, and by the mid-eighteenth century intellectuals in France appear to have become aware of it. At this point, the idea of public opinion emerged in a more structured way and it has recently attracted the attention of historians in the wake of Habermas.

<sup>15</sup> See in particular E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1979), and D. Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province: Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 2 vols (Paris, 1978).

In a recent article, Keith Baker has argued that public opinion was not so much constituted by a sociological group, such as the bourgeoisie, as it was an imaginary tribunal, that is, an authority replacing the traditional monarchical authority as the ultimate arbitrator in society.<sup>16</sup> It is not yet clear whether public opinion was a force called into being by both monarchy and 'outsiders' to political power – the latter evolving a strategy and using opinion as a vehicle for their ambitions – or an existing reality merely noticed and exploited by writers. Whatever the answer to this question, it seems more likely that opinion is of greater significance in showing us where revolutionaries got their ideas from than in explaining the politics of the late Ancien Régime. It is hard to show that appeals to a new public opinion affected the course of pre-revolutionary struggles. Without studies of the actual strategies and politics of the users of such a notion, we should therefore be careful not to assume that it was important to those principally involved in politics in an age of courts when outside commentaries mostly had little effect upon decisions. Thus if public opinion was at this stage something of a fictitious tribunal, it remains to be shown how far political discourse within the public sphere reflected the practice of politics.<sup>17</sup>

What part, then, did public opinion play in the political game as perceived by its chief practitioners, the decision makers? That it had a part to play is certain. However, as students of Ancien Régime politics frequently remark, much of the political activity was occult, excluded from the public discourse.<sup>18</sup> This area is an important one to explore in more detail because the results of research may be a significant reevaluation of the concept of public space in the eighteenth century. It would be a pity if the association between bourgeois political culture and public space, present in Habermas' original work, were to be carried over to the more occult, aristocratic politics of the regime. I shall below try to substantiate the view that the political life and definition of 'the political' itself, as revealed by practice under the Ancien Régime, are sufficiently different from the ideas of them presupposed by the present notion of public space, as to raise serious doubts as to its applicability, unmodified and perhaps anachronistic, to Ancien Régime political culture. To say as much is not to deny that this fourth dimension was being invented within the Enlightenment and was to have a subsequent importance in practice. These criticisms are not intended so much to invalidate the notion of public space as, by revealing it to be an interaction of many perhaps neglected elements, to point out the difficulty in locating it.

<sup>16</sup> K. M. Baker, 'Politics and Public Opinion under the Old Regime: Some Reflections', in *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France*, ed. J. R. Censer and J. D. Popkin, (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 204-46. See also M. Ozouf, 'L'opinion publique', in Baker, *Political Culture*, pp. 419-34.

<sup>17</sup> J. Sgard, P. Rétat and a team of historians have explored one approach to this problem in a number of valuable works, focusing upon one year in the periodical press. See especially *Le journalisme d'ancien régime*, ed. P. Rétat (Lyon, 1982) and *L'attentat de Damiens: Discours sur l'événement au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. P. Rétat (Paris, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> In this context, see Baker, 'Politics and Public Opinion', pp. 209-10.



To an extent, therefore, the new intellectual history has not yet risen to the challenge of a wide definition of discourse, because the evidence is still taken overwhelmingly from theoretical works and legal texts.<sup>19</sup> In the same way as for institutional history, too often there is a failure to use informal documentation or the evidence of day to day politics in all its forms. This is indeed ironic, because the studies of discourse thereby actually seek to explain the political culture without concentrating on 'the facts of political life'. They thus are bent on defining political culture by the works of those on its margins, rather than those at the centre.

Consequently, it would be risky for historians to construct a new interpretation of the French Revolution upon such foundations before addressing some of the conceptual problems. The recourse to a dialectical interpretation highlights this issue. It is one thing to trace the implicit contradictions inherent in royal discourse or theories of institutions, power or representation, and such may be the proper task of the intellectual historian. However, it is quite another to demonstrate how these contradictions forced the development of a situation; it is very hard to show that they were indeed perceived as crucial and in some sense were crucial to politics. What is the link between the revelation of contradictions to actors on the political stage and their subsequent actions? How do actors modify their position in the light of contradictions? As yet, only a philosophy of the dialectic can bridge that gap and we may not all feel convinced by it. Against the appeal to the force of new ideological contradictions, it could plausibly be argued that it was not the newly developed or newly researched contradictions which fuelled events in 1787-8 so much as age-old political practices and attitudes.<sup>20</sup> The debate provoked by the crisis itself then opened the way to further ideological debate which profoundly conditioned the final outcome of the crisis and the nature and course of the Revolution. The regime had already broken down when the force of the debate made itself felt.<sup>21</sup>

For these reasons we should accept with caution the elements of a new interpretation in the conferences on political culture. Many of the studies in the first book have only a limited relevance to the political culture of the Ancien Régime. Instead, they tease out the areas of debate which, under the impact of a more or less traditional crisis, were to develop into revolutionary culture. That the contradictions inherent in the political culture of a regime which has collapsed might play a vital role in forming the basis of a new culture we might easily grant;

<sup>19</sup>Two recent studies to make a notable departure from this are D. Garrioch, 'Verbal Insults in Eighteenth-century Paris' and D. Outram, 'Le langage mâle de la vertu: Women and the Discourse of the French Revolution', both in *The Social History of Language*, ed. P. Burke and R. Porter (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>20</sup>Strictly speaking, I would agree that old contradictions would be as good as new for the dialectical view – but the thrust of current interpretation is to emphasise the new politics of the Enlightenment.

<sup>21</sup>For a fuller statement of this view, see my 'Louis XVI, King of the French' (on the ideological origins of the constitutional monarchy) in, *The Political Culture of the French Revolution*, ed. C. Lucas, (Oxford, 1988).

that the contradictions were themselves the principle motor of the events leading to the fall could only be accepted on the basis of a belief in a dialectic of contradiction as a philosophy of history. We might be justified therefore in detecting a hidden Hegelianism behind some of the new work.

Reflecting on this appeal to the dialectic in revolutionary historiography from non-Marxist historians, we may perhaps interpret its attractions as follows. Firstly, within the context of discourse analysis, it provides an interpretative tool to replace Marxism and subsequent sociological models. If Marxism and class struggle will not do, for some the concept of discourse provides a tempting and more convincing alternative. Revolution may be seen as the result of a dialectic reflected in forms of discourse and the inherent contradictions it expresses. For example, it seems to be François Furet's view that the continuation of the Revolution may be seen as essentially a product of the necessary contradictions inherent in the ideology of 1789. The particular advantage of this emphasis on contradiction is that discourse subsumes the social, and thus interpretations need not exclude social conflict (although in practice at present they do tend to, perhaps for reasons of political philosophy). This may be reassuring in so far as it allows the theoretical inclusion of obvious social tensions in the explanation without risking a confirmation of Marxist revolutionary ideology. But, as has been stressed above, it is easier to emphasise contradictions in discourse than it is to show how they related to actions and events.<sup>22</sup> Thus the question of how contradictions cause events, raised above, could have the consequence of restricting our focus. Historians of the Revolution seeing it as implicitly a consequence of paradoxical juxtapositions need pay no more attention to the politics of the crisis, usually seen as a precipitant, than does most previous historiography in the 'social revolution' tradition.<sup>23</sup>

Difficulties with the notion of political culture, discourse and public space, and thus with the interpretation and significance of a politics of contestation within that space, all lead back to what is almost a missing dimension in eighteenth-century studies. There is a marked absence of sophisticated analyses of politics which are sensitive to new currents in historical research. However, it is necessary to attempt a definition of political life and this can only be done by detailed studies of the practice of politics – as opposed to merely studying the verbal discourse generated by it.

<sup>22</sup>If one may be allowed to keep that old distinction, not quite successfully abolished by proponents of discourse, between events and their representation.

<sup>23</sup>I have discussed this problem more fully in a paper I intend to publish, "Crisis and the early modern state" given at the First international conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas, Amsterdam, 1988.



## II Politics in a Court Society

Baker provides a definition of politics which precedes his treatment of political culture. 'Politics, broadly construed, is the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another.'<sup>24</sup> Politics would thus cover a very wide range of activities: essentially, it would be the strategies by which people get what they want. Unfortunately, this view is rarely adopted in studies of the Ancien Régime and is certainly not the one implied in the papers in Volume I of *French Political Culture*, in which implicit definitions are much more closely related to state activity. Courtiers, with all their considerations and ambitions fit into the first definition rather well, but hardly at all into the narrower one *as the state is currently defined*. Again, the narrow, statist definition has disadvantages, especially for the study of provincial France where perceptions of the state were vague, and where ambitions, careers, and to a large extent life in general, were conducted in a world far removed from concerns about the monarchy. Even provincial institutions were in some areas only a somewhat remodelled adoption by the crown of pre-existing provincial courts. We should, for example, surely find that urban 'politics' was as much a matter of advancement for individuals and families, the accumulation of money, honour and dignity, as it was about the undeniable contradictions of royal fiscal policy (*pace* Bossenga).<sup>25</sup> Even at the provincial level royal concerns were not matched by those of leading officers and dignitaries in the locality. Just as for urban elites, royal politics – even in the meetings of the provincial estates – was often more a question of exploiting the monarchical interest for the sake of personal considerations than a matter of shared common assumptions and language. To put the question in other terms, it is the extent to which the various sides do not speak the same language which should concern us. Finally, we might, with Louise Tilly and Edward Thompson,<sup>26</sup> recognise that there was a local 'political' or 'moral' economy of bread which must be regarded as political from the perspective of the hungry peasant or urban worker but which was not so regarded by the intendant or minister. These three examples serve to underline both the importance of practising a broad definition and the danger inherent in the idea of a single political culture. The examples raise the question of how we should categorise or integrate the expression of 'private' concerns in 'political' life. This is a question which is also fundamental to the study of political culture at its centre. It is on this area that the remainder of the essay will focus. By way of introduction, the briefest of surveys of the history of the state, of monarchical theory and of the court will permit us to highlight and

discuss some crucial aspects of political life.

Even a conventional definition of politics is bound up with long-standing views and debates on the nature of the Ancien Régime. As a result of the royal propaganda of the seventeenth century and the historiography first of Voltaire, then of Tocqueville and finally of the institutional historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the early modern state has been seen as having undergone a transition from the medieval state to a proto-modern state, essentially administrative and bureaucratic in character. Against this view, a more recent interpretation would argue that the baroque state was itself a form of state, closely dependent on society, with its own coherence and characteristics which had come into existence by the sixteenth century and which was to continue to exist, its essential characteristics intact, until the Revolution.<sup>27</sup> What the baroque monarchy had succeeded in doing was devising a way of making the network of socio-political structures and ideologies that was 'the state' function in times of greater stress, and enable it to rise to the weightier demands put upon it. This situation did not preclude the adoption of some new functions in certain areas, but these, in spite of the intense historiographical interest in them (which therefore overvalued their significance) should be interpreted as grafts onto an older model. They did not result in a transformation into an all-but modern administrative state, even if many of the new elements were destined to come to the forefront during the Revolution and after. In a sense, it is precisely because Louis XIV had not succeeded in transforming the state that politics had its specific character after the 1750s. For example, the ideas and careers of ministerial reformers or intendants such as d'Argenson, Silhouette, Turgot, Trudaine and Necker were surely an attack on and a response to the traditional structures and practices of politics as they were inherited from the age of Louis XIV.

It is the continuities that should be emphasised, since the essential structures were the product of long-standing practices and rationales. Monarchical theory changed remarkably little over many generations. The following brief survey of the court and politics will serve to situate the remainder of the discussion. In the Ancien Régime power was derived from God and was held by the king, whose sovereignty was undivided: he was an absolute monarch. Although on many occasions the king could impose his will arbitrarily – for example, with *lettres de cachet* – there was a long-standing and clear theoretical distinction between authority exercised legitimately according to the laws of France, and despotism, which was the abuse of power. The king had to exercise his considerable authority in a legal and Christian fashion and in particular he had to respect all the rights, privileges and customs of the corporations, orders and localities. Because France was not so much a unified state as a diverse collection of provinces and corporate bodies dominated by independently-minded local elites, general policies were difficult to frame and even more difficult to execute. In practice, therefore, royal

<sup>27</sup>This assertion is substantiated for Languedoc by W. Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracies in Languedoc* (Cambridge, 1985), and more generally in my *The Ancien Régime in France*.

<sup>24</sup>Baker, *Political Culture*, p. xii.

<sup>25</sup>The other view is put forward by G. Bossenga in 'City and State: An Urban Perspective on the Origins of the French Revolution', in *Political Culture*, ed. Baker, pp. 115-40.

<sup>26</sup>L. Tilly, 'The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2 (1971), 23-57; E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136.

power was rather limited: it was impossible to introduce sweeping changes without being accused of despotism. For this reason cooperation and persuasion rather than force were necessary for government and hence the importance of propaganda and ceremony. Only a royal court could provide the forum for such a system.

The court centred upon the king's household. A courtier was therefore a noble honoured with some task in the royal domestic service: gentleman of the bedchamber, master of the hunt, lady-in-waiting or simple page. The court had a long history but Louis XIV had expanded it, rendered it sedentary and refined it as a political instrument. Soon there were thousands of court officers and Versailles was the model for all Europe. Like a magnet, it drew nobles from the provinces, for at court they shone in the reflected glory of the king. The court now existed to exalt the monarch and concentrate the gaze of observers. An elaborate system of etiquette and hierarchy enmeshed the aristocrats who surrounded the king, making opposition difficult but encouraging quarrels amongst the courtiers. Life at court became a byword for deceit, intrigue and manners refined to the point of absurdity. Everybody watched everybody else for the smallest indication of ambition, intrigue or advancement in royal favour. The courtier thus concealed his true character and motives behind a mask.

Nevertheless, this world was of prime political importance. The court was the only central institution for the whole state. Patronage and clientage were fundamental precepts of society and the networks came together at court where the king was the ultimate provider of graces. Every local elite had connections with great landowners, magistrates or governors, all with places at court. Grand aristocrats with easy access to the king and his ministers would intervene to secure favours for their clients or would act as go-betweens to reduce opposition and promote covert compromises. It was unbecoming to royal majesty to be seen to negotiate, but the reality of politics was that almost everything was a compromise. The royal government therefore relied upon its centralisation of patronage to ensure that the political machinery continued to operate. The court provided the inducements and it provided the means.

If personal relations were an important part of the social and political system, faction was the inevitable by-product. There was bound to be competition to influence the king and his ministers. Life was expensive at Versailles and the great families needed royal largesse and profitable financial investments in order to maintain their lifestyle. The famous *Livre rouge*, published in 1790, mentioned only two million livres in pensions, but there is evidence that in the 1780s the true figure was nearer thirty million. So pensions, lucrative sinecures and contracts were hotly competed for by cabals of the most important families. But competition was not just for places, it was also over policies – with serious consequences for the monarchy. In politics, faction created a certain inertia as courtiers were more concerned to advance their families than they were to encourage sound policies. Thus, when a minister began to pursue unpopular measures of economy or centralisation his supporters at court would abandon him. By contributing to his dismissal they hoped to remain on the winning side and

consequently secure greater influence for themselves. Reforming ministers were sure to run up against powerful vested interests, especially if, like Loménie de Brienne, they reduced the household expenses. The great reformer Turgot fell foul of this mentality in 1776 and so did Necker in 1781. All the king could hope to do was balance the factions in order to divide and rule.

Ministers could not be above faction for they too were courtiers and needed to compete for favour and rewards. They had to reckon with the long-established influences of members of the royal family as well as with short term intrigues. The houses of Orléans. Condé and the Rohan-Guéméné were powerful and the King's extravagant brothers, Provence and Artois, could not be ignored. In the late 1780s the Queen and her circle became of sometimes decisive importance. Although Necker was favoured by public opinion and had many supporters at court it was the Queen's influence which finally led to his recall in September 1788.

Within the court, 'ce pays-là' as it was so often called, I would like to focus upon the behaviour and outlook of a minister, and then of a courtier. As argued above, faction was a dimension of politics indispensable to both of these types and certainly merits our further attention. Its practices directly generated much of the political literature of the period, from songs through the *libelles* to memoirs. It will also be necessary to consider the role of political ideas within the culture. Considerations of space preclude fuller discussion of hierarchy, youth and the strategies of ambition, significant especially in the context of oppositional politics, although all of these were important. Much could be said about each of these aspects, but the sketches here are intended to be sufficiently detailed only to bring out the points to be made about the character of politics and the evidence it generated – or in some cases failed to generate.<sup>28</sup>

The duty of a minister with a department – there were six at a given moment, plus a seventh as the *Lieutenant Général de Police* – was to effect the King's business. He was officially the chief administrator of his branch of government, with bureaux in Paris, and was usually a member of several councils. He might work individually with the king at his 'travail', if a chief minister like Fleury or Maurepas was not present to witness his discussion and limit his power. Not all ministers were equal in the eyes of contenders for office, and if the Controller General of Finances became the chief minister briefly during Necker's second ministry (1788-9), that was not previously the case. Principal ministers such as Richelieu, Fleury or Maurepas were usually without portfolio, but it was an advantage to control the postal service and the *feuille des bénéfices* for ecclesiastical patronage, as well as the avenues of approach to the king. Nobles from older military families would not consider any but ambassadorial posts, the ministries of war and foreign affairs; the other ministries went to robe families, as the pinnacle of a successful career. Clearly the difference between them lay both in the higher prestige of association with the military as opposed to other more plainly bureaucratic functions, and in the fact that the judicial ministries required

<sup>28</sup> It was not unusual for the *lieutenant de police* to be ordered to confiscate and burn incriminating private papers for 'reasons of state'.

expertise in the magistracy. It is a moot point as to how far administrative criteria were uppermost in men's minds as they contended for high office. The rewards of office were great in themselves and patronage was one of the most significant. Ministers had the power to grant favours, dispensations, monopolies, posts or lucrative assignments within the limits imposed by the king's prerogative and the constant machinations of groups of rival families. The correspondence of every minister contained vast numbers of requests for patronage and preferment from patrons and clients of more or less long-standing. The surviving documents may be the tip of the iceberg for many have been destroyed as uninteresting, and most requests were no doubt made in person, when paying court.

Once established in power a minister had to protect himself. He did this by consolidating his position through the patronage connections he built up and the graces and favours he was in a position to obtain. If possible, he secured positions at court for relatives tied too closely to his family interests to abandon him when the road was rocky. There were often rivals for his post and these would be supported by the principal families and factions. Even if he owed his position to the king or queen, he needed to devote enormous amounts of time and energy to the preservation of his position. This alone was sufficient to discourage all but the most foolhardy from announcing a programme of reforms before he was in office because any change made to the status quo at court or in the provinces would usually result in growing pressure for dismissal by the aggrieved parties. This accounts for the especially rapid turnover in Controllers General during the century. There were no fewer than eight from 1774 to 1787. Consequently, a minister was required to have a system which made it clear that he was a man to be reckoned with and a dangerous enemy. In the 1740s the brother of the maréchal de Belle-Isle spelt it out:

Il ne se cachent pas d'avoir pour principes: 1. Qu'ils n'ont à envisager que deux espèces d'hommes, leurs amis, et leurs ennemis, 2. qu'ils regardent comme leurs ennemis tous ceux qu'ils ne peuvent se flatter de devoir regarder comme leurs amis, 3. qu'ils ne doivent regarder comme leurs amis, que ceux qui se montrent disposés à les servir en tout, et partout aveuglement, et à prendre leur party, soit qu'ils aient tort, ou raison, 4. qu'en revanche ils doivent se montrer disposés à servir aveuglement ceux, qui se livrent à eux sans réserve, et se montrer ennemis irréconciliables et persécuteurs outrés de quiconque se trouve dans leur chemin, et s'opposer au succès de leurs desseins, et entreprises. 5. que pour avancer leur fortune il n'y a point de moyens, tels qu'ils soient, qu'ils doivent négliger, dès que le succès leur en paroît vraisemblable.<sup>29</sup>

The duc de Choiseul had evidently adopted the same policy in the 1760s, as the memoirs of Moreau testify. Because Moreau was a potential client of Sartine, Laverdy was more than wary of him. He records that the duc de Vauguyon tried to make sure that he had no access to the Dauphin except through him. Commenting on Choiseul, he remarks on the 'esprit exclusif' of ministers who would not tolerate a man being attached to other influential people. 'J'ai eu plus

<sup>29</sup> Richer d'Aube, 'Réflexions sur le gouvernement de France', Bibliothèque Nationale, MS., Nouv. acq. fr., 9515, p. 39.

d'une fois, occasion de remarquer cet esprit exclusif de quelques Ministres, et cela seul eût suffi à me dégoûter de leur intimité, car je n'ai jamais pu être l'âme damnée de personne. Ce caractère de domination est celui de tous ceux qui désirent être ou se croient chefs de parti.'<sup>30</sup> Demonstrably, every minister was a courtier and had to operate as such, even if his administration was based in Paris instead of at Versailles. 'Les ministres sont devenus nécessairement courtisans, et, s'ils ne le sont pas, ils sont promptement disgraciés comme corps étrangers et hétérogènes. Ainsi, les voilà participants à toutes les volontés des courtisans.'<sup>31</sup> Yet, there is often so little in historical studies of their office to remind us of this. There is a strong possibility that disputes over policy were in fact mainly disputes over power, with policy as the vehicle. The Brittany affair is a good example of this, ending as it did with the 'reform' of the parlements; no historian can yet be said to have fully recovered the reality of the politics involved in the Maupeou coup.

In trying to answer the question of what was a courtier and what was his *mentalité*, the historian is apparently on firmer ground. Discussions and analyses of courtly life were almost a genre, so frequent were they. Courtiers were the subject of moral condemnation for their sinecures, greed, hypocrisy, flattery, mercenary behaviour, expense and, increasingly, their unjustified privileges. If they were women, they were condemned for licence, undue ambition and meddling in affairs above their station. For more than a century from La Bruyère to Mercier courtiers are condemned in literature, and Beaumarchais had his forerunners. When gathered together, the frequent vignettes tell us something of the *mentalité* and practices at court – although other evidence must be called upon when evaluating this genre. La Bruyère expressed one of the most important insights:

Un homme qui sait la cour est maître de son geste, de ses yeux et de son visage; il est profond, impénétrable; il dissimule les mauvais offices, sourit à ses ennemis, contraint son humeur, déguise ses passions, dément son coeur, parle, agit contre ses sentiments ... se dérober à la cour un seul moment, c'est y renoncer.<sup>32</sup>

To be a courtier was thus a full-time occupation and one for which it was constantly necessary to wear a mask. The coded language of the court was more than nuanced: every word, every phrase, gesture and expression was significant. To let the mask slip for a moment was to reveal oneself, and this would enable more subtle minds to add to their knowledge of you and subsequently to triumph over you. Knowledge was power. Although there are numerous stories of fits of anger and mistakes, it is remarkable how stereotypical so many descriptions of individuals are, and consequently how little is known about individual courtiers, especially those destined to be successful. Complete discretion was essential for success and every mood was adopted in public in the full knowledge of its possible interpretation. This masking of feelings and ambitions means that observers

<sup>30</sup> J. N. Moreau, *Mes souvenirs*, ed. C. Hermalin, 2 vols (Paris, 1898-1901), i. 141.

<sup>31</sup> *Mémoires et journal inédit du marquis d'Argenson* (Paris, 1863), v. 350.

<sup>32</sup> *Caractères*, "De la cour", Nelson edition (1945), p. 254.

learned to scrutinise faces with skill to detect signs of anger or pique that might enable them to deduce the result of an interview or a council meeting. Only long experience and hindsight would show contemporaries if they were right, but they had to act before such confirmation was available. If it was hard for the actors themselves to be sure of a situation, it is equally so for the historian. One thing is certain, though: in their own terms, all was political.

If the court was a political instrument, then in some sense courtiers were also political whatever their activities. It was just as necessary to play the same roles and participate in faction in order to safeguard a position of dignity, as befitted an elevated station, as it was to acquire more influence over decisions of policy. While some houses of the peerage had little taste for influence in the council, others had high ministerial ambitions. By way of an example, the moderately successful career of the duc de Richelieu (1701-88) is worth studying in so far as he reveals very clearly in his early correspondence his attitudes and ambitions. From his ambassadorship in Vienna, he wrote to a confidant, in code:

... pour moy il y a uniquement deux choses qui m'ont obligé à faire cecy. La première est l'espérance d'améliorer ma situation par une charge ou un gouvernement; la seconde, l'amour-propre de me faire croire capable des choses les plus sérieuses, j'y ai peut-être réussi parce que je me donne tout entier et me porte avec vivacité et même avec fureur à tout ce que je fais, mais c'est en moy un état violent et surnaturel, et par conséquent qui ne peut être que passager. Comprenez, je vous conjure, et approuvez cette façon de penser puisque je comprends la vôtre, et ne disapprouvez pas l'indifférence dont il m'est que le Duché de Sleswick soit au duc d'Holstein ou au roy de Danemarck, et la couronne de Suède dans la maison de Hesse ou d'Holstein et même Gibraltar à qui on voudra pourvu que j'aye une charge qui me mette à l'abri de la tyrannie des secrétaires d'état, et me laisse tranquillement lire ce que je voudrais, m'amuser avec mes amis et les servir auprès du Roy, de tems en tems ménager ma santé et me divertir des choses simples, ou enfin un gouvernement qui me fasse mener une vie de petit souverain, c'est à dire à faire du matin au soir ce que je voudrais, et la facilité de rassembler des gens à qui je pourrai quelquefois faire plaisir, à condition de faire tout ce que je voudrais. Voilà ma façon de penser, et tout ce que j'ay le tems de vous dire aujourd'hui.<sup>33</sup>

He was to achieve these ambitions but in later years he lost influence and never succeeded in entering the council of state. He then channelled his energies into the advancement of his family, the protection of the Académie française and patronage of the theatre. Without being anachronistic, it is difficult to disentangle these threads of his life one from the other, and call one political and another private.

The language of the court was extremely subtle and is now difficult to interpret. The study of court politics is therefore a complicated task conditioned by the ambiguities of the evidence and of our own categories. But it must be attempted and it is not an impossible one. By sifting all the evidence carefully and evaluating the position and potential reliability of the witnesses, their memoirs, their correspondence, be it private or patronage-oriented or administrative, the

minute changes in rank and position and the knowledge that hindsight confers, it is possible to construct a sort of 'real' account of what 'actually' happened – I use the terms 'real' and 'actual' loosely. Such an account is of great use. The evidence of individual memoirs, journals, newspapers or the reports of *nouvellistes* may then be measured against it for its accuracy as a portrayal of 'politics'. Only in this way may the nature of the discourse of journalists or other creators of public opinion be fully evaluated.<sup>34</sup>

When all is said and done, given the nature of courtiers and the structure of life at the court, there was little likelihood of any outsider getting to the bottom of any affair.<sup>35</sup> Even when a journalist was fed information by a minister, and there are examples of this in Lenoir's memoirs for the 1780s, this might well have been with a view to influencing public opinion in favour of a certain faction. In the light of this we might well conclude that many of the sources for political life are best used as evidence not of what happened but of what was considered to be a plausible interpretation by an informed observer.<sup>36</sup> The failure to respect these limitations in the evidence has marred the work of almost all historians of those events which had a courtly dimension. It goes without saying that the loose use of anecdotal and memoir material is counter-productive. There is quite simply no short cut to the 'facts' of political life once the court is recognised as its focal point.

Faction exploited networks of influence to achieve political goals. Because competition was for limited ends within a closed system, in many cases the success of one faction depended upon the defeat or discrediting of another. Although there is no space here to discuss the matter at length, it was the case that factions would pull strings with clients in the various administrative or judicial institutions such as estates or parlements in order to make life more difficult for rivals and to sabotage their policies. This aspect of politics has been too little investigated in the Paris parlement and particularly in the Assembly of Notables. Talleyrand observed that the 'intrigues, qui après avoir scandaleusement agité l'assemblée des notables, avaient fini par anéantir toutes les espérances qu'elle avait permis de

<sup>34</sup>But see also J. D. Popkin, 'The Prerevolutionary Origins of Political Journalism', in *Political Culture*, pp. 203-24, and the articles in Censer and Popkin, *Press and Politics*.

<sup>35</sup>The sections in Campbell, thesis, on the fall of the duc de Bourbon in 1726 and the fall of Chauvelin in 1737, seek particularly to investigate them in the fullest detail and evaluate the different sorts of evidence. It is remarkable how inaccurate many of the accounts in memoirs were.

<sup>36</sup>Such might be a principal value of Pidansat de Mairobert's works such as the *Journal historique de la révolution opérée dans la constitution de la monarchie française*, par M. de Maupeou, chancelier de France (London, 1776) and the *Memoirs of Madame du Barry*, 1777 translation. ed. E. Cruickshanks (London, 1956). Mairobert was a leading *nouvelliste* from the 1740s and kept registers from the discussions of politics etc. at madame Doublet's salon, which he used as *nouvelles à la main* and as material for publications, and, as Popkin and F. Moreau have shown, for foreign news-sheets: see esp. F. Moreau, 'Les Mémoires secrets de Bachaumont, le *Courrier du Bas-Rhin*, et les *bulletinistes parisiens*', in J. Varloot and P. Jansen, eds, *L'année 1768 à travers la presse* (Paris, 1981).

<sup>33</sup>Richelieu to Silly, 16 July 1727, Bibliothèque Victor Cousin, Fonds Richelieu, 33, fol. 29-30.

concevoir... on peut concevoir que les hommes et les corps menacés par ces réformes aient mis tout en oeuvre pour les rendre impossibles, que ces légions d'ambitieux qui se disputent les ministères, aient saisi ce vaste champ pour se livrer à de grands combats...'<sup>37</sup>

Such practices help us to explain why accurate information was so rare, and why the discourse on politics was so ill-informed. To rely too much upon the public news to characterise politics or analyse the march of events in the last decades of the regime would be a mistake. Unfortunately, little is known about how readers interpreted the news they were so avid for. Did they regard it sceptically, as they might the forcefully expressed opinions of a *nouvelliste* in a café? Did they learn to read between the lines as citizens do where censorship prevails? If they did, perhaps they nevertheless accepted with extreme credulity all of the apparently credited reports, especially those stemming from clandestine sources, simply because news was so rare. Whatever conclusions the public came to, its collective opinion formed that chimerical variable, public opinion.

However, it was even more complicated than that. The history of public opinion is still young and not all aspects of it have been considered. From the present perspective some omissions may be rectified. This 'tribunal', as it was later to be called, surely existed in the eyes of ministers and courtiers long before the mid-eighteenth century. If not, it is hard to explain the function of provincial estates and the drawing up of cahiers for the several Estates General. In particular, the public was appealed to, as J. Klaitz has shown, during the wars of Louis XIV.<sup>38</sup> In the 1720s, financial edicts appealed to a notion of 'the public'<sup>39</sup> and it is tempting to conclude that the realisation of the importance of public opinion for credit preceded that of it as a tribunal. Opinion affected the interest rates to be paid for government loans. Interestingly, there is another aspect of public opinion still more closely related to court politics and which is also observable as early as the 1720s. Royal ministers were supposed to safeguard the commonwealth on behalf of the king; if it could be shown that they had the *vox populi* against their policies, they would be endangering royal prestige and the ship of state by giving rise to disorders: fiscal or bread riots might occur. Therefore, interested parties could maintain that the minister should be dismissed before his policies jeopardised the state. Faction seized upon this and in the same way as it pulled strings with clients in institutions to discredit policies it was not above manufacturing public opinion as a powerful weapon in the game of 'Otes-toi de là que je m'y mette'. For this reason, deliberately spread rumours (the 'on-dits'), the hawking of placards, witty lampoons and songs that went the rounds were all constituent of a 'public opinion' which could be exploited. So opinion was both

<sup>37</sup> *Mémoires du prince de Talleyrand*, ed. duc de Broglie, 5 vols (Paris, 1891-2), 1, 169-70.

<sup>38</sup> *Printed Propaganda under Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy and Public Opinion* (Princeton, 1976).

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, *Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises*, ed. J. Isambert, 29 vols (Paris, 1822-33), for June 1725, vol. xxi. 288, 293.

generated by a genuine increase in interest and manufactured in part by courtiers and *nouvellistes*.

In the light of these reflections, public opinion in the late Ancien Régime can be seen not only as an independent tribunal which was a force in politics, but also as a tool employed by both the ministry and courtly or judicial opposition; it was another and newer element in an older political game. The public was not so much well-informed about the realities of politics in terms of the true springs of events as it was about the plausible interpretations that could be deduced from the very limited evidence it had available. It is notable that, for the most part, the public did not play a significant role in the crisis of 1787-8. There is considerable evidence from eye-witness accounts that the 'popular' disturbances in support of the parlements were instigated and led by interested members of the *basoche*, the lower orders of the legal profession who depended for a living on the courts, and were not therefore the result of the anger of an informed public.

Again, from the perspective of research into political life, it is interesting to raise the question of the status or role of ideology. Numerous historians have focused upon the ideological origins of the revolution, but far fewer have as yet chosen to link their investigation more precisely to the development of the crisis of the Ancien Régime. Both approaches suffer from professional bias: where the historian of politics might tend to discount ideology in favour of an interpretation based on interest, the historian of political theory or the sociology of ideas might tend equally to assert the greater significance of conclusions in that field. Let me therefore limit myself rather safely to one major issue.

Two cases serve to illustrate the essential point: the formal records of the Paris Parlement in the 1730s, when the courts were being manipulated on jurisdictional grounds by the *parti janséniste*, and of the Assembly of Notables in 1787, when intrigue was partly instrumental in its failure. Both episodes give the impression that the issues were primarily legal. Although there are some indications that all was not as it seems, it is only by going behind the scenes with the aid of informal records, as Van Kley has partly done for the 1750s, that the problem is clearly revealed. The formal language actually conceals the operation of *partis* or factions which expressed their opposition through a legalist discourse suited to the forum in which it was to be employed. Legal and perhaps constitutional language had to be used in courts of law. Thus, an examination of new theories put forward in such disputes still leaves unsolved the question of at what point the modern political ideologies became the central issue.

All political language expresses ideology and however consensual it might appear, it involves the possibility of conflict or contestation. This is as true of the seventeenth century as it is of the late eighteenth, for that is its function.<sup>40</sup> To put

<sup>40</sup> More particularly, the three strands of political thought which Baker identifies as the most significant and new in his article 'French Political Thought at the Accession of Louis XVI', *Journal of Modern History*, 50 (1978), 279-303, seem to me to be in evidence 150 years earlier as shown by the disputes between Bellière and Villeroy over venality of office at the end of the Wars of Religion.

the accent on a politics of ideological contestation from the 1750s may therefore be another way of saying that politics looks more modern or ideological from that point on. The complexity of the issues is well illustrated by the fact that the transformation to a more modern language took place as a consequence of Jansenist preoccupations articulated by a *parti* within and without the Paris parlement. Clearly, in terms of the new language of historians, different discourses were operating at the same time on different levels to fulfil different strategies. To focus upon one to the exclusion of the other would be a mistake even within the framework of the new interpretation. It is necessary to study both the articulation of interests and the theories employed. For the former, such factors as hierarchy, honour, youth, and ambition, will also be found to have had a major effect on the course of disputes.<sup>41</sup>

It is time to reexamine the political life of the Ancien Régime, with the aid of recent methodological insights but without becoming trapped by some of the assumptions in the new approach. Those who focus on the new politics should take more seriously the view that the dissolution of the regime began at its centre. Any search for the 'new' political institutions and languages must be predicated on a fuller understanding of the pre-existing structures and discourses. Historians who emphasise the importance of contradictions should recognise that more than contradiction alone may be necessary to explain the dissolution of a longstanding political system. Regimes can often survive their inherent contradictions for long periods, and this had been the case with the absolute monarchy. A dialectical determinism therefore sidesteps some of the most interesting problems of the period. The new interpretation has opened up so many new paths that it would be disappointing if, by looking back from the Revolution, it sought to explain its origins in the light of what was to come after. Nevertheless, my intention here has not been to discount the recent theoretical developments. On the contrary, they provide an explanatory structure which helps to reveal how existing political ideas, the developments in political theories, in political language in which words like *nation*, *patrie*, and *despotisme* become common, the growing realisation of the paradoxes of the regime and the emergence of an informed public, were all instrumental in transforming a crisis into a revolution. This is itself no mean achievement.

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<sup>41</sup>For an exemplary study, see J. Meyer, 'La noblesse parlementaire bretonne face à la pré-révolution et aux débuts de la révolution: Du témoignage à la statistique', in *Vom ancien régime zur Französischen Revolution* ed. E. Hinrichs and R. Vierhaus, (Göttingen, 1978).